



News Release

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Utah's Peak Influenza Season Winding Down

(Salt Lake City, UT) – One of Utah's earliest influenza seasons is coming to a close*. The season ran from October 2003 to May 12, 2004, with 6,340 influenza cases reported to the Utah Department of Health (UDOH) and 12 local health departments. The season was marked with a high number of reported cases and an early season peak as well as high demand for vaccine.

The influenza season started early this year. Influenza peaked during November and December this season versus February and March of the last season. The early peak created a higher-than-usual demand for vaccine. In a typical year, between 70 and 75 million American's receive influenza shots. This year, the entire amount of vaccine manufactured (83 million doses) was distributed.

During the 2002-2003 season there were 1,053 lab-confirmed cases in Utah. Much of the steady increase in reported cases is due to increased testing for influenza, increased disease monitoring and a data change that includes listing the cases identified through rapid testing. Of course, not everyone who gets influenza goes to the doctor or has a test done to diagnose the infection, so the actual number of Utahns who had influenza is expected to be higher than reported.

This year, influenza virus infection was equally likely to occur in men and women. People of all ages, and in all areas of the state, reported influenza infections. The average age of people with influenza was 16 years. This young average age is due in part to greater use of testing for influenza by doctors who care for children.

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The UDOH tracks influenza (flu) activity by reports of patients diagnosed with influenza by monitoring absenteeism at schools throughout the state and by monitoring the rates of influenza-like illness at 38 sentinel healthcare clinics.

A variant strain of influenza A (Fujian) was reported this year. While relatively few Utah samples were tested at CDC, most of the strains identified were Fujian. This year’s vaccine was not formulated with the Fujian virus, but contained a related strain of influenza virus. Preliminary studies from this influenza season suggested that the vaccine was less effective than usual against the variant Fujian strain.

The influenza vaccine is now being reformulated to be more effective against the Fujian strain of influenza. Additionally, federal agencies are looking for ways to better assure an adequate vaccine supply, especially for people who are highest risk of complications.

*The Utah Department of Health provides active influenza monitoring October through April during the “Influenza Season,” which is the time when outbreaks are most likely to occur. With increased medical surveillance and rapid travel to other countries, influenza can be diagnosed at any time of the year. However, the number of cases during the spring and summer months is much lower than during the fall and winter so active public health surveillance ends temporarily.

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The mission of the Utah Department of Health is to protect the public's health through preventing avoidable illness, injury, disability and premature death, assuring access to affordable, quality health care, and promoting healthy lifestyles.